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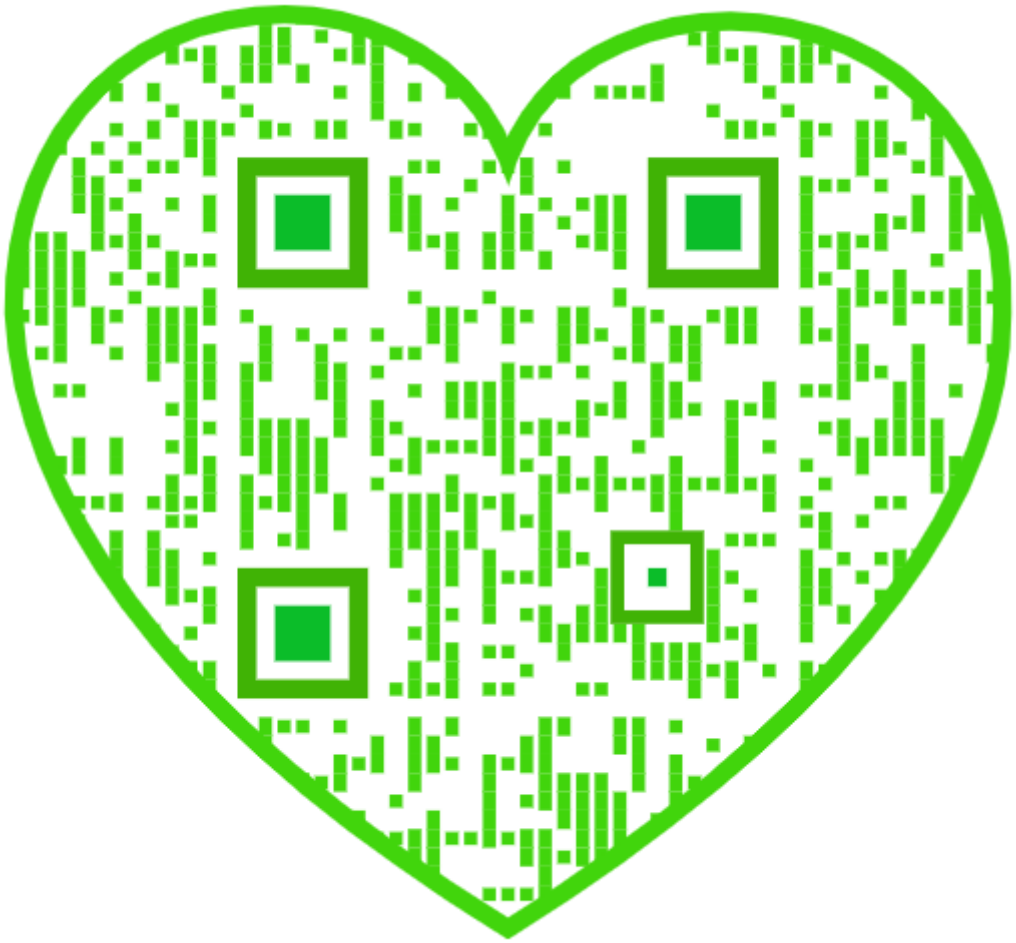

Alaska Basketry

BY

V. V. CAVANA

From the Collection of the Author

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PRIVATELY PRINTED
BY THE
BEAVER CLUB OF OREGON
PORTLAND, OREGON
1917

E98
.B3B37

First Publication

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By the BEAVER CLUB OF OREGON

JUL 28 1917

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Introduction

Declaring itself to the public through this, its first publication, the Beaver Club seeks to place itself in that group of idealists that not only believes in dreams, but also believes that by patient, sincere and reverent effort, dreams may be made to come true.

There is a dream that many have held and toward the realization of which many have labored—and it is the dream of a thing made glorious through the patient, perceiving labor of those who produce it. To such a vision, and to the manifold works that have been done in the striving towards its realization, the world owes the most of whatever it can boast which is, beyond all else, rare and lovely and infinitely to be desired.

In its present and future work, the Beaver Club hopes to add, from Oregon, from the Pacific Northwest, a distinctive and valuable contribution to humanity's store of things rare and beautiful and, as nearly as possible, perfect. The perfection sought is not the infinitely reduplicated perfection that comes through the infallible accuracy of machines, but the perfection that comes through conscious and zealous artistic effort of persons inspired by a desire to attain to a high and sweet ideal.

The books of the Beaver Club possibly may never come to be loved and sought after because they are the most beautiful of their kind in the world; but the Beaver Club hopes to make them appreciatively beautiful to the world because their production is to the Club, above everything else, a labor of profound love.

It is in keeping with the spirit of the Club that its first publication should be Miss Cavana's monograph upon Alaska Indian basketry; for her studies in this subject have been quite as sincere a labor of love for her, as the

labor we have undertaken in launching the series of rare publications of which this is the first.

Miss Cavana went to Alaska in 1897 and lived for six years in the heart of the basket-producing districts, and during her life in Alaska she pursued a study of this art, then beginning to show only the first signs of deterioration, at first hand among traders, officials, Indians, squaw men—anywhere that information might be secured that would be of a valuable nature.

Indian basketry, by the very nature of things, is slipping rapidly into the category of those arts whose products must have, besides their natural beauty, the added charm of growing rarity; and this brings the subject still more strikingly into harmony with the aims of the Beaver Club in bringing out this limited edition of its first publication.

The spirit that has inspired the members of the Club has, we believe, been caught by the printers to whom the work was intrusted in its final stages, and they have given it the benefit of the most painstaking, sincere expression of their handicraft, of which they are capable.

Other monographs that the Beaver Club will bring out in future may achieve something more pretentious in conception, arrangement or workmanship, but as they do so, we will feel that it is, in a measure, a development from the patient and serious effort that has been given to make this first publication as nearly perfect in its expression of our ideal as possible.

There can be no keener feeling of the gratification that springs from an earnestly performed effort to produce something that will add to the things rare and beautiful in the world, than the feeling that the Beaver Club enjoys in being able now to witness to kindred spirits in the world, this, its first step toward the realization of the great dream of rare, of lovely, of perfect workmanship.

THE CLUB EDITOR.

From the Collection of the Author

Alaska Basketry

By V. V. Cavana

BASKETRY is the oldest of the arts. There are ethnologists who claim this distinction for pottery, alleging that the first basket was an attempt to imitate in textile fabric the form of some crude specimen of the primitive potter's work. But basketry is far more ancient than the first basket. Its earlier manifestation would be, perhaps, some brush roughly intertwined to form a temporary shelter—some strips of bark or grass twisted to make a needed cord —a coarse mat to serve as a garment of sorts. The vessel we call a basket would be a later and much more advanced development of basketry.

Possibly the truth, if we could prove it, would lie in the statement that basketry and pottery are twins, and that they grew, co-eval, out of primitive woman's adaptation of her work to her environment. If she saw the track of some animal in wet clay, dried and sun-hardened, and capable of containing water, or if she found the moist earth beneath her fire burned to a stonelike solidity, perhaps her brain would conceive and her hands execute a vessel of clay for her own domestic use. While, if grass was abundant, and trees and shrubs abounded in her surroundings, the idea of the basket would inevitably grow, even through generations, and her fingers would labor to materialize it.

At any rate, whether the one or the other is older, or whether they were co-existent according to environment, both these developments of woman's genius are prehistoric and universal. All of the past, and all of the earth's surface, are the field for the student of them. But in the study of basketry, he will run upon the most serious difficulties. It was, and still is, practiced by all primitive peoples; but they never were keepers of records, nor makers of any but the crudest pictures. Delicate, beautiful, artistic in the highest degree their baskets may have been; but the drawings they made of them (prehistoric picture-writing and the like), are hideously crude. They left us no history of themselves, much less of their basketry. The basket itself is perishable, and civilization renders it obsolete. It vanishes, like the people who made it.

But that it *was* made, we know from picture-writing on the rocks; from scraps miraculously preserved in the Mounds, in the cliff houses and caves of the Stone Age, in mummy chambers; from the imprint of the fabric in fragments of prehistoric pottery; and, after the dawn of history, from allusions here and there in the scanty records of contemporaneous civilization.

The aboriginal inhabitants of North America, and particularly those on the Pacific Slope, have made baskets in infinite variety from the days of the unknown Mound Builders and the mysterious Cliff Dwellers and Aztecs. Those of the later centuries are mentioned in the writings of the missionary fathers and others of the earliest adventurers who followed the Conquest, and who had the interest to observe and the skill to record. Such mention is usually casual and brief, sometimes no more than an allusion. In the midst of lives so strenuous, in whieh the

struggle for mere existence from day to day was often cruel, and sometimes in vain, the native basketry was a negligible trifle. But that of the generations immediately preceding our own has been studied and described, usually by government scientists, so that for that period there is no lack of reliable material for the student.

From Patagonia to Point Barrow, the native woman has always made her baskets. Every possible weave, and every available material appear. Soil and climate play their inexorable part, and racial characteristics write themselves legibly in the fabric. Odd diversities appear side by side, and odder similarities at enormous distances.

No part of America offers greater variety, or greater excellence of workmanship, than Alaska. Its natives belong to four great families—those of Athapascan stock in the interior, those of Eskimauan stock on the northern and western coasts, the various tribes of Southeastern Alaska, who are of the Koloschan family, and the Haidas of the south, who live only partly in Alaska and are of Skittagetan stock. But different tribal branches of the same stock often present marked ethnological differences, and in the matter of their basketry, have frequently little or nothing in common. For instance, the Aleut and the Eskimo are both of Eskimauan stock; yet they differ in appearance, disposition, intelligence, language and customs; and in basketry they have no common traits, the Eskimo producing a poor quality of coiled work, and the Aleuts the finest woven baskets in the world. Thus it is plain that a classification of Alaska basketry will differ somewhat in its subdivisions from an ethnological classification of the people who make the baskets. It is with the former that this text deals briefly.

Alaska basketry includes both of the great types, woven and coiled. But in numbers, and also in beauty, the woven baskets far exceed the coiled variety. Moreover, as tourists visit only Southeastern Alaska, and there see only the woven spruce root native to the region, with a few of the grass baskets, also woven, from the Aleutian Islands, these two varieties are usually supposed to comprise all of Alaska basketry.

It should be remembered that trade, intermarriage and migration have rendered the geographical demarcations between the several varieties somewhat vague; but in a general way, beginning at the extreme southeast of the territory, the various sorts are produced as follows:

Locality	Race	Type	Material
1. Southeastern Alaska	Haida	woven	cedar bark, spruce and cedar root
2. Southeastern Alaska	Tlingit	woven	spruce root
3. Aleutian Islands	Aleuts	woven	wild rye grass
4. Bristol Bay and Kuskokwim River	Eskimo	woven	wild rye grass
5. Norton Sound and Arctic Ocean	Eskimo	coiled	grass or willow
6. Upper Yukon River	Tinné	coiled	spruce and tamarack root, willow
7. Lower Yukon	Tinné	both	spruce root, willow, grass

1. *Haidas.* Following this grouping, the first baskets encountered will be those of the Haidas, who live partly in British Columbia and partly in Alaska, in a coast and island region of magnificent cedar and spruce forests. From these splendid trees they secure the materials to produce three distinct varieties of woven basket. The cedar furnishes an inner bark, which, after proper manipulation and seasoning, gives long flat brown papery strips. These the Haida women weave in flat checkerwork into soft mats, bags and baskets. By crossing and diverting the elements traveling in one direc-

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tion of the weave, they produce a very pretty openwork variant of the checkerwork method; and certain slight changes in the handling of the strips give a twilled effect that may be repeated at intervals with pleasing results.

Iron stain, copper stain and alder stain will produce respectively black, green and red; and strips thus stained, introduced at intervals, furnish color decoration.

From the peoples to the south, they have learned to use the wrapped twined weave, which is native to the northern part of Vancouver Island, but which has been adopted all along the coast from Oregon to Prince of Wales Island. In this latter region, the Haidas make frequent use of it for small baskets intended for light use, or for ornamental purposes. It consists of a series of upright warp elements with two woof elements traveling around the fabric horizontally, as in the case of the plain twined weave. But in the wrapped twine, one of these woof elements remains always on the inside of the basket, while the other is wrapped around each warp and the inside woof where they lie together. The warp and the inside woof are of cedar bark, while the wrapping strand, covering the others entirely on the outside, is usually of squaw grass. This produces, if the grass is properly cured, a fine ivory-colored mosaic effect that is really very pretty, even in the cruder pieces. There used to be a weaver or two among the remnant of the Haidas, who carried these baskets to an extreme of beauty and delicacy; and I have in mind a little round, covered treasure-basket, about three inches in diameter, from the region immediately south of Ketchikan, that shows a thousand and fifty stitches to the square inch of its exquisite fabric.

So much for the two varieties made from cedar. From the spruce they gather and prepare the root, precisely in the Tlingit manner, of which I shall speak presently, and weave water-tight vessels in the close plain twined weave. By using a stronger, coarser fiber than the Tlingit ordinarily do, they produce a heavier, more rigid basket. It is also from spruce root, in a finer fiber, and an ornamental variant of the plain twine, that they weave the famous Haida hats, beloved of basket collectors. These hats are splendid specimens of basketry, made from selected root by the best weavers, in a certain prescribed manner, the description of which would entail too much detail for the purposes of this writing. They are graceful in shape, perfect in line and finish. Color was not inwoven, but was painted on the surface in totemic design—the only example, by the way, of totemic design in color in this basketry. Like many other splendid types, they are no longer made, and the searcher for them must go to old collections.

2. *Tlinget.* The work of the Haidas being thus sketchily treated, a brief account of the processes of the Tlingits is next in order. They are the group placed second in the table, and they comprise a number of tribes, with all their numerous clans and minor divisions, inhabiting the coast to the north and then to the west of the Haida country. They were the superlative basket-makers of Alaska; for while the next division mentioned, the Aleuts, produced some pieces of almost unbelievable fineness, it must be borne in mind that they worked in a more tractable material—grass. The Tlingits probably wove more baskets than all the other Alaskans combined; and their excellence was recognized by those

most severe critics, the Alaskans themselves; for Tlingit baskets were articles of barter with remote tribes, before the presence of increasing numbers of white people had given a larger market, with its attendant evils.

The Tlingit woman shaped her basket definitely for its intended use, and employed the technique (of which she practiced five forms) prescribed by tradition for that especial purpose. Thus was produced an amazingly interesting variety, from the tiny shot-pouch and the dainty covered treasure-basket, to the yard-wide berry-tray, and the huge twenty-five-gallon oil-storage basket. Perfection of workmanship was characteristic of these women. Even the big water-tight oil baskets were as smooth in texture as a piece of cloth, perfectly symmetrical in shape, bordered at the top with one or another of the recognized designs for the purpose, and finished off with wonderful precision in one of several styles. The border might be merely one or two bands of color (red, black or purple), or it might be, and in the case of the Chilkats was sure to be, a geometric design without color, effected in a raised pattern by a slight change in the stitch. These big baskets were woven of so fine a fiber that a square inch on the surface of them will sometimes contain one hundred stitches; and their texture is so flexible that when not in use, they may be folded flat like a paper bag to be laid aside until needed.

Even in excellence there are degrees; and among the Tlingits, the Chilkats and the Yakutats were the best weavers. But a good basket is not a matter of skillful weaving only. The selection and preparation of the materials was a slow and laborious process. The Tlingit women,

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according to Emmons, selected a spruce tree in healthy condition, from one to two feet in diameter, and prospected with a fire-hardened stick for the far-reaching growth of new root. When found, this was carefully dug out with the hands and the stick, sometimes in lengths as great as twenty feet, and in thickness about the size of the little finger. These lengths were coiled and carried home, and inside of a day must be barked, which was done by steaming over coals, or in mud under a bed of coals, and then drawing the strip between the tines of a cleft stick. This process required judgment and skill, as too much, too little, or too dry heat were all fatal to the quality of the cured fiber; and too little pressure on the tines of the "eena" failed to remove the bark, while too much pressure injured the surface and destroyed the prized lustre of the outer wood.

After removing the bark, the women coiled the root again and left it to season. The gathering was done in the spring, and the wood seasoned during the summer months, when the demands of berrying, fishing, and other forms of food collecting and storage, were imperative. In the dull winter days, the root was split and the basket woven. The commercial demand for Tlingit baskets is brisk and not discriminating, and the habits of the natives have changed considerably since the influx of the white people. Consequently, weaving is now carried on at all seasons, so that as many baskets as possible may be made for sale. This of course cuts out the long period of seasoning for the wood, which explains one form of deterioration in the baskets of the last fifteen years or so. But formerly, when there was time for all things in order, the weaving was a winter occupation. The coils were soaked, and then split with

teeth, thumb-nail, and a sharp shell. Three qualities of fiber resulted, of which the outside was the toughest and glossiest, and therefore the best, and the inside, or heart, was too pithy for use, and was thrown away. Needless to say, the entire work, from beginning to end, required patience, strength, judgment, skill—all those qualities that make good work anywhere in the world.

The split root must be soaked again before weaving, during which it was kept damp by moistening the fingers occasionally. The work began at what was to be the center of the bottom, in the following manner: Several strands of the correct estimated length for the basket in view were caught together at the middle by a half hitch of another strand, to be used as woof. The warp splints were then spread open, as the radii of a circle, and the woof strand twined in and out among them for a few rounds, thus forming a tiny circle. New warp must then be introduced between the strands of that already in use. This was done by folding the new strand at the middle, and catching the loop over the turn of the inside woof element, and then working the new strands into the fabric on the next round. Examination of the bottom of any good basket makes this plain, although the explanation sounds a trifle complicated.

As the close plain twined weave (wush-tookh-ar-kee, close together work,) is the necessary foundation for the characteristic Tlingit form of decoration, its technique should be understood. After the circular (or, very rarely, oval,) base has been completed, and the upright walls are beginning, numerous warp elements stand up like a stiff fringe around the circumference of the basket, and two woof elements are twined in and out, over and under

each warp element. As each woof strand comes to the outside, it takes a half turn over the other woof strand, between warps, always in the same direction; so that the two woof strands, if they could be seen without the warp, would form a twisted cord of perfect regularity. In fact, this can be seen sometimes, in case of a break in the fabric, which allows the warp to slip out, leaving the cord of the woof plainly visible. It often occurs in the delicate grass baskets of the Aleuts, who use precisely the same stitch. This weave produces a flexible water-tight vessel, which, as said before, may be folded like a paper bag when not in use.

For baskets in which no colored decoration was intended, such as the cooking baskets and the storage baskets, a weave called khark-ghee-sut (translated by Emmons as "between, or in the middle of,") was used. It consisted of alternating rows of the plain twine and the checkerwork, and therefore effected a saving of one-fourth of the woof material. Thus, one round of the work would consist of the upright warp, with two woof strands twining over them; the next round would consist of only one woof strand passing over and under the warp; the third round would be a repetition of the first, and the fourth would be a repetition of the second. This weave was water-tight, and was frequently used in the bottoms of baskets of all kinds, except by the Yakutats. In new pieces, it appears rather rough and crude; but in the splendid old relics of a vanished age, the rows of twined work were forced down so closely together that the intervening one-strand row can barely be discerned.

In some vessels, such as those used for draining the water out of some kinds of food, an openwork effect

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was desirable, and in others it was used for ornament. Again, if a water-tight basket was not necessary, the openwork saved an appreciable quantity of material. The Tlingit used such a weave, calling it wark-kus-khart, or eyeholes, and obtained it by diverting the warp. Every other warp element was deflected to the right, the alternate ones turning to the left. This caused the warp to cross continually, like lattice work, at an angle of about forty-five degrees. At each crossing, the warp elements were caught by the two woof elements of the plain twine. The result was an open fabric, diagonal warp, horizontal rows of woof, and hexagonal mesh. The Haidas, as noted before, got much the same effect in their one-strand woof.

A fourth style of technique in practice by the Tlingits was hiktch-hee-har-see, which required the same elements as the plain twine. But the two woof strands inclosed two warps at each turn, instead of one, and on the next round of the work, split these pairs, inclosing two as before, but not the same two. This work, like the plain twine, presents the same appearance on the wrong side as on the right. It produced a raised diagonal or twilled effect, and by manipulating it in connection with the plain twine, geometrical patterns were obtained in the fabric. The function of this weave was that of ornament. It appears in the borders of the Chilkat storage baskets, and on the brims of the Haida hats.

Uh-tahk-ka (twisted) was a three-strand weave,—that is, it required three woof strands. Each passed back of one warp, and then over two warps. In working, it showed two woofs on the outside of the fabric at all times, and one on the inside; and when completed,

it presented a raised cord on the right side, while the wrong side of the work showed no trace of it. It was both strong and highly ornamental, and was usually introduced at points in the work where the heaviest strain of use would fall, such as the base of the walls of the basket, and the top. Alternate rows of it produced a corded border that was very handsome. The hat crowns offer the only examples of its use for the entire fabric.

These are the five weaves practiced by Tlingit weavers. The strawberry weave of which we sometimes hear is merely plain twine, with one of the woof strands colored. This brings the color to the outside in alternate stitches, and so produces a spotted effect, like the seeded surface of the wild strawberry. It was used in bands for decorative effect, and was especially characteristic of certain forms of basket, such as the large berry tray. Also, it often appeared in the bottoms of other baskets.

One of the most interesting features of the Tlingit basket is the finish at the top. When the desired height had been attained, some neat and secure method of fastening off the work was a necessity, both for beauty and for strength. Lieutenant Emmons, in his researches in this basketry, classified such methods in twelve forms. The simplest was the case of the low covered basket, for which a lid was woven to fit exactly over the top, and in the use of which no particular strain was put upon the rim. Here the weaver simply stopped the work and cut off the warp close to the last row of woof, often using a few rows of khark-ghee-sut at the end. In this way she secured a flat surface in both lid and basket, insuring a neater fit than might otherwise have been

possible. The Haida hat also, for obvious reasons, was finished by merely clipping the warp. But any basket intended to carry burdens needed a stronger finish. The plainest of these was made by turning down the end of each warp element, and weaving it under the next turn of the woof strands, on the inside of the basket. When the round was completed, the woof was fastened off, and the warp ends clipped close. This produced a sort of selvage edge, strong enough for all ordinary purposes, and very neat. If the basket was designed for very hard service, and greater strength was needed, one or more extra strands of woof were introduced, and the warp ends were involved in a three- or four-strand braided finish. The Chilkat cooking and storage baskets always had a four-strand braided finish, complicated in execution, but unsurpassed for wearing qualities. Some of the baskets made from Sitka west to Yakutat Bay had a perfectly marvelous four-strand finish, not braided, but woven more like the uh-tah-ka, as round and smooth as a piece of wire, with not a warp end visible. One marked difference between the old and the new baskets is the lack, in even the best of the new work, of this skillfully executed finish at the top.

Colored ornamentation in this basketry was very beautiful, in method, design and color. Grass for the purpose was gathered in the early summer, before it was ripe, dipped in boiling water, and spread out in the shade for slow drying. Several varieties were used, according to the supply available in the locality. Emmons says that panicularia nervata was most esteemed, and was never dyed, being highly prized for its glossy rich ivory color, and being a recognized article of commerce, as it grew only in certain places.

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In applying grass to form decorative designs, the weaver wrapped it around the outside woof element only. Thus, it did not pass back of the warp, and was consequently not to be seen on the inside of the basket. Emmons's term "false embroidery" seems to be as good as any other to designate this particular form of ornamentation, and is used in these descriptions; but it must be remembered that it is a wrapping of the decorative element around the outside woof strand only, in the course of the weaving, and is done with the fingers, no needle or other tool being used, and the decoration proceeding stitch by stitch with the structure of the basket.

The decorative designs used in Tlingit basketry were not symbolic or totemic. This is positive. They were pictorial, representing natural objects so highly conventionalized as to be impossible of recognition unless a clew to the meaning was available. Moreover, they most frequently represented, not the object or animal itself, but some characteristic, quality or result of it. For instance, the several butterfly motifs do not represent the insect, but either the markings on its wings, or the wavering line of its flight; and the wave motif of the Yakutat does not represent the wave itself, but the line of the foam and drift that it leaves on a sandy beach as it recedes.

Tlingit designs were handed down from generation to generation of weavers, and used with slight variations to suit the personal taste of the maker, or to fit the space upon which they were applied. Emphatically, realistic designs have no place in this basketry, except in the case of the Shaman's hat; nor have totemic or symbolic figures. Tlingit carving, painting and blanket-

weaving were all symbolic, and all in totemic or realistic design, but not Tlingit basketry. Any such designs used on the new baskets are the result of contact with the white people—regrettable imitations of something seen among them, or the result of suggestions from traders and tourists. As a case in point, the symbolic figure known as the swastika, which has a significance among primitive peoples as widely separated on the surface of the globe as India and Arizona, has no place whatever in Alaska design nor in that of British Columbia. Yet it is now very commonly seen on the baskets of both regions. In Southeastern Alaska, it is the result of the suggestion of a certain dealer, who presented his native friends with a copy of the figure, and urged the weavers to adopt it. Also, about ten years ago, many baskets began to appear upon which realistic figures of the raven, the whale, the crow, etc., were used, instead of the beautiful old conventional traditional Tlingit designs. These seemed to appeal to the tourist as being very characteristic, and were freely purchased. So that many of them are now woven. They may be thoroughly good baskets in other respects, and the discriminating buyer will sometimes purchase them for the sake of their undoubted qualities in those other lines; but he will always be entirely aware that the decoration is spurious.

Nor was realism in color attempted. The native means of producing color limited the range, and any pleasing combination was used with any design. Such color as they had, was charming. To begin with, they had the beautiful ivory of the cured but undyed grass, and the glossy brown or purple of the stems of the maidenhair fern; and these two in combination, applied

with true Tlingit art to the seasoned wood-color of a good basket, would win a delighted approbation from any lover of beauty and skill in craftsmanship. Huckleberry juice was much used. It gave a good purple, and they dipped both grass and root into it, and often the fern stems too, because their natural color varies a good deal. There are mineral springs in the region, and by boiling their material in the water or by burying it in the hot mud, they secured a black or brown. A certain coppery-looking blue or green is said to have been just what it looks like—copper stain; and a fur trader once told me that an orange tone I admired in a basket-maker's tray was obtained from a clay deposit back in the country. Of these two I cannot speak positively. But a most pleasing yellow is known to have been a decoction of wolf moss; and alder wood and bark steeped in a certain primitive mordant, gave most beautiful and permanent shades of red. Hemlock bark will give a black stain. These are the colors of the old basketry; and to the lover of rich color, they will appeal as no modern improvements upon them can do.

The Tlingit woman seldom applied her decoration directly upon the natural wood-color of the basket. She preferred to make a background for it. This she did by using dyed root for the woof strands while applying the embroidered design. So that, when finished, the bright design in grass stood out upon a dark, sometimes a striped, band, edged at top and bottom with a single row of contrasting color. As before stated, the manner of applying the so-called embroidery is such that it is all on the outer surface of the work, and does not appear on the inside of the basket. But the background band,

being the woof itself, of course shows as plainly on the inside as on the outside.

In speaking of color, something must be said of aniline dye. A druggist who was in business in Juneau from 1888 to 1892, years before the day of the Klondiker or the tourist, has told me that he always kept in stock, for the use of the native women, plenty of Diamond Dyes, and that he was in the habit of selling them in lots of two or three dozen packages at a time, to natives from as far west as the Copper River Country. One package of this dye would come near to giving all of its particular color that could be needed for the decoration of the season's entire community output of baskets; and the increased range of color interested and pleased the women, especially the younger ones. Besides, this ready-to-use and easily-applied dye eliminated the slow and laborious methods of the ancient ways, and was therefore doubly welcome. This is merely a manifestation of never-changing human nature. The women of early New England spun the yarn of which they knit the family stockings; their great-granddaughters bought the yarn by the skein; and their descendants of to-day buy the stockings outright. Under similar influences, this development will occur in any environment, so that there is no occasion for surprise in the universal use of aniline dyes in basketry. It is one thing that makes the old baskets so precious. Some of the dealers of to-day are trying to induce the weavers whose wares they handle to make baskets with little or no dye, using the ivory grass and the brown fern stem, and perhaps some huckleberry or alder stained strands. Such pieces, if well made, are highly desirable.

Furthermore, the fact that a basket is colored with aniline is in itself no sufficient reason for discarding it, if it is otherwise all that it should be. Some very excellent work is dyed with aniline, and, unless the basket is very old, it is often difficult to be sure of the nature of the coloring, *if* the maker has been artistic enough to stick to the characteristic Tlingit range. But above everything, the collector desires to know the *truth* about his specimens.

The use of the word truth suggests some pessimistic reflections about the difficulty of getting at it in regard to Alaska basketry. It has seemed to me, after twenty-odd years of interest in the subject, that few persons know anything at all about it. Many who are well-informed in regard to the basketry of other regions, have little or no knowledge of the Alaska branch of the art, and, furthermore, often appear unwilling to admit this. It is not strange that the work is not as well understood as that of other parts of our country—there is good reason for it; but it *is* strange that sensible people should so often pretend to a knowledge they do not possess.

3. *Aleut.* Aleut basketry, the third of the great divisions of the subject, is the product of the stormy, foggy, sunless chain of islands stretching from the end of the Alaska Peninsula to a point far over in the eastern hemisphere, near to Asia, and nearly two thousand miles west of Yakutat. It is a region of terrific isolation, which travelers never reach. The Nome passenger steamers, stopping at Unalaska, form the nearest approach of travel to the westward reaches of the Aleutian Chain. Once a year an island trader's schooner

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visits them, carrying needed supplies, and bringing away furs and the year's output of baskets, except such as they keep for their friends of the revenue cutter which makes its annual call soon after. (Porter.)

Primitive man makes use of the means at hand. No timber of any sort, but abundant wild rye grass, grows upon these islands. Hence, grass is the material of their basketry. It is all flexible, and the grass is often split to such extreme fineness that the resulting basket will not hold its sides upright. The women gather it with care, searching far for the best growth, like all good weavers, selecting only the two or three choice leaves on the plant, and curing them slowly in the shade of their houses. By gathering earlier or later, and curing in varying degrees of dampness and shade (there is little else!) they obtain delicate variations in the color of the cured strands, which they use most effectively in the warp of some of the work. The usual shades are a pale golden straw-color, and a faint tealeaf green. Sometimes, in decoration where its brittleness will not affect the strength of the basket, they use an almost white strand, plucked very late, after it had ripened on its root.

Their weaving, with one isolated exception, is all done in variations of the plain twine, but they make several distinct types of basket, with recognizable local characteristics. The grass is very long and very soft, and the warp will not, of course, stand upright in weaving, as the Tlingit spruce root will. Therefore the Aleut weaver suspends her basket, bottom upward, and weaves deftly among the thick, long, soft fringe of warp depending from it. The work is done in the dark winter, in the

dim, close interior of half underground hovels. Yet some of it has no peer in basketry.

Their decorative materials consisted, before the introduction of silk, of the previously mentioned variations in the color of their working straw, of eagle down, which they applied but scantily, of hair, of skin, and of grass dyed with native substances. There were no brilliant feathers available for them, as for some of the southern weavers. In their sad, bleak little scraps of volcanic islands, nothing is brilliant but the evanescent spring flowers that bloom on the sod tops of their huts for a brief season. Their dye materials were extremely limited, and, from all accounts, rather dull in effect.

In technique, their decoration is very similar to that of the Tlingit, but more varied. They often use exactly the same false embroidery, but they lay their designs directly upon the uncolored grass of the basket, not using the colored band for a background, as the Tlingit do. In the tiny "cigarette cases" they frequently use the colored material for woof, but in that case, it constitutes a part of the design itself. This involves a constant carrying along on the wrong side of the filaments not then in use for the design, and adds one more to the complications of this amazing textile art. In the larger baskets, they use wool in colors, sometimes in the false embroidery, but more often as follows: A strand of the wool is caught under the outside woof element, and is then reversed in direction and caught under the next woof element, the loop being pulled tight. Both ends are then cut short. This makes a tiny figure like a U upside down, and is repeated until the portion of the design which lies on that round of the work has been accom-

plished. When the basket is finished, the design is composed of these tiny tight loops and their short clipped ends, and therefore has a fuzzy appearance. For bands running around the basket, they do not clip the wool, but catch it under each turn of the woof, first up, then down, then up again, giving a continuous wavy line. Often these bands of ornamentation are complex, consisting of a central line of colored grass, perhaps an eighth of an inch in width (very wide for this work) used in checkerwork weave, with a waving line of wool on each side.

Their designs are no more symbolic than those of the Tlingit. Of late years, they mean nothing. But the old specimens show forms that strongly suggest conventionalized insect, bird and flower forms, or lines of flight, or of water disturbance, such as the wake of swimming creatures. These are exactly the things that the Aleut woman would see all her life, and undoubtedly it was from these sources that she first drew her decorative inspirations. But I have never been able, so far, to get any reliable information about it. Mr. Porcher, the author of by far the best article on this basketry that I have ever seen, and who is freely quoted by Dr. Mason, does not enter into the matter at all.

The colored design may be near the top, in a well-defined band, with line borders, or it may consist of a more or less close arrangement of figures over the entire surface. Some of the old specimens of large covered Atka basket with slightly convex walls, were practically entirely covered with geometrical figures in perfectly symmetrical arrangement, the size of which diminished above and below the center, in a beautiful perspective

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that brings to mind the designs of the famous Nevada weaver, Datsolalee. But Datsolalee's work is coiled over heavy foundations, and is rigid; while this of the Atka women is woven, is flexible, and is of an extremely fine and threadlike texture.

These Aleut baskets are sometimes finished at the top by means of the turned down warp inwoven in the course of the work, exactly like some of those of the Tlingit, so minutely classified by Emmons; and sometimes by gathering the long warp in small braids, and then plaiting these small ones into a heavy ropelike braid running along the top in scallops, through which the grass cord can be drawn for convenience in carrying weight.

In all the Aleutian Chain, there are, according to Mr. Porcher, only eight villages of any size. Five of them, including Unalaska, are on Unalaska Island. Here the natives are of course subjected to considerable white influence, and the quality of their basketry has suffered accordingly. Combinations of the weaves and designs of the whole island and of the other islands occur, so that there is no longer a distinct type. But they seem to favor two forms rather strongly: one the small covered basket, cylindrical in shape, dimensions probably about six by six, weave either close plain twine, or crossed warp openwork, rather poorly made; and second, the large open top basket in plain twine, of rather coarse fiber, with the warp standing close, and the rows of woof running about half an inch apart. Both these types show colored ornamentation.

The next large island to the west is Umnak, with its village of Nikolski, where most of the work is heavy and

coarse in texture. Porcher mentions a peculiar type that was occasionally found here and nowhere else—a flaring open basket, beginning with a well-made base in unsplit grass, the warp of which was split and re-split as the sides rose, and woof of corresponding gauge introduced. Thus the work, beginning with a coarse fiber at the bottom, grew finer and finer as the work advanced, till the top was an extremely fine close weave, finished by braiding off the warp.

Westward another two hundred miles or so lies Atka Island, with its village of Atka, and in this place the white influence is less baleful. The Atka burden-basket, the heaviest of all Aleutian work, is the only example of the wrapped twined weave to be found in the islands. Its development in this region differs from that among the Haidas. In the first place, the fabric is openwork. Next, all the elements are of the same material. Then, the woof element which lies horizontally along the warp is on the *outside,* while the wrapping element is inside the basket. Last, the wrapping element does not take a diagonal turn about both the warp and the other woof, as in the case of the Makah work, but merely reaches out between the warp elements and loops around the other woof, then passes back of the warp and out through the next space, catching the woof, and so on. It is a very simple stitch in comparison with the Makah and Haida development of it, and well suited to the material, and the purpose for which it is used. Another typical basket of Atka is the splendid barrel-shaped, covered specimen, decorated over its entire surface, which has been mentioned before. The warp is straight, separated very slightly, and the woof rows of plain twine run about

their own width apart. The fabric is therefore a very fine openwork, with a rectangular mesh, and the basket is one of the most beautiful examples of Aleut work. Here also is found the delightful little cylindrical covered basket in close plain twine, water-tight, daintily decorated, extremely beautiful and delicate.

Far over in the eastern longitudes, five hundred miles beyond Atka, lies the end of the Chain, Attu. Attu, the home of the most exquisite basketry in the world! Here the acme of daintiness is reached. Aside from baskets designed for the very roughest, heaviest work, two characteristic types prevail, a large open basket, and the tiny "cigarette case." The large sort will be eleven or so inches in height and diameter, made of grass split to extreme fineness. The weave is plain twine, in crossed or diverted warp, which is frequently of two shades of grass, presenting faint vertical stripes in the fabric. The woof rows will be not more than an eighth of an inch apart, and the grass strands are sometimes a thirty-second of an inch in diameter, so that the whole big basket is like a piece of lace, and will not hold its sides upright and apart. During the process of weaving the maker introduces, along with the warp, on two opposite sides of the basket, two or three firmly twisted cords of the grass. These are very fine—probably about a sixteenth of an inch in diameter—but tight and strong; and she weaves them in as warp all the way up. The braided loop finish before described belongs with this type, and in making it, the weaver begins her braiding at one of these reinforced points. When she has finished her plaiting all the way around the top, and is back at the place of beginning, she continues the braid to make a heavy

cord, perhaps thirty inches long and as thick as her little finger. The end is knotted and left free. When the basket is in use, (and in their natural environment these delicate lacelike creations will safely carry thirty pounds of fish,) the free end of the cord is run through the loop at the other reinforced point, and the weight is swung over the shoulder. This type is decorated by means of a broad band of geometrical figures around the top, done in colored wool, with very frequently some touches of snow-white sculpin skin by way of accent.

The wonderful "cigarette case" is really two tiny baskets. They are woven in cylindrical form over two pieces of wood, one a shade smaller than the other, and when completed are slipped off, folded flat, and telescoped. The entire world of basketry (and that means the terrestrial globe, as basketry is a universal art,) offers nothing that is superior, and little if anything that is equal to them. It should be remembered that they are made from the coarse wild beach rye, maniplated by human fingers only. If any tool enters into their construction, it is a knife-blade to split the grass, and even that is doubtful. Probably a thumbnail does the work. Yet the grass is split with absolute regularity, to such fineness that the weaving will show from thirty to fifty stitches on one inch of a row, and this means upwards of two thousand stitches per square inch.

Folded, their dimensions will be something like two and three-quarters inches by four, though I have seen the coarser ones larger. The weave is close plain twine, and the exquisite circular base is a thing to marvel at. It generally shows a few rows of crossed warp openwork, looking like fine hemstitching in a piece of pongee. If

the decorations are to consist of circular bands around the basket, as they often do, single rows of this openwork will be introduced at harmonious intervals in the walls. Sometimes these colored bands are made by the use of silk as woof, with microscopic dots of false embroidery in white sculpin skin. Sometimes the designs are geometrical figures in regular arrangement, either false embroidery or a development of the woof. When it is remembered that the grass woof and the silk woof must for much of the work be carried along together on the wrong side, and that the perfect execution, a row at a time, of a repeating design, is a complicated matter, one marvels more and more at these little baskets. They cannot be said to have any utilitarian purpose at the present time, but their qualities of workmanship furnish sufficient excuse for their being. The demand for them created by the communication with the world established by the cutters so long ago, is said to have improved the weave for a time—a condition which frequently obtains on the first contact of primitive weavers with a market for their wares, but which invariably holds only up to a certain point, after which the inevitable commercial deterioration sets in. The larger baskets of this group, as well as those of the other groups, photograph very well; but no photograph of a first-class specimen of this type ever conveys any adequate idea of its charm. For one reason, age, and a careful selection and curing of the material in the first place, give them a lovely pale but warm golden color that is a delight to the eye; and for another, only a minute inspection of the dainty little object itself will reveal the perfection of its finish.

Of the age of individual baskets of the Tlingit and Aleut divisions, an estimate is usually all that can be offered, based upon known characteristics and developments, and upon comparative appearance. It is almost impossible to get authentic information from the natives, for several reasons. So that in most instances, the history of this specimen or that cannot be given much farther back than the time of its coming into the possession of white people. There are, however, certain pieces extant, known to date well back into the eighteenth century. Emmons mentions such a basket, preserved at a certain tribal headquarters among the Tlingit. From their fragile quality, the Aleut baskets would be of shorter life than the Tlingit, except in the case of the little "cigarette case," and that is so dainty in size and so light in weight, and is instinctively handled with so much more care than any of the other types, that it would undoubtedly attain much greater age. Of both the Tlingit and the Aleut, it should be borne in mind that they are created in a cold, damp climate, particularly the latter. In their native environment they are flexible, strong and tough, capable of withstanding a surprising amount of heavy rough use. In the dry heat of civilized homes, they require far more gentle handling.

4. *Kuskokwim.* The people of the fourth division, Bristol Bay and the Kuskokwim River, use a coarse grass, unsplit, and produce a flexible woven basket that is interesting but not particularly ornamental, and not to be compared in quality with either the Tlingit or the Aleut work. It is done in the close plain twine, but either the texture of the grass, or some personal equation in the handling of it, gives to the finished basket a distinct

character, quite unlike any close plain twine grass basket made to the south or west. The base is frequently oval instead of circular. The grass is cured to a dull brownish shade, very different from the clear pale gold of the best Aleut work. Near the top, some of the woof strands show a dark brown color, and are used in alternation, like the Tlingit strawberry weave, or in pairs to produce a solid line of color. By this simple means, neat little decorative bands in the plainest of conventional designs are worked in the fabric. The finish at the top consists of a turning down of the warp, it being then worked in under the next and last line of woof; but the ends are usually rather long, and the finish has a somewhat ragged look on the wrong side. These baskets are not an article of commerce with the white people to any extent, because they do not come to the attention of the basket-buying tourist, and because if they did, he would prefer the Tlingit work with its gay colors. Furthermore, while the skins of birds, animals and fish enter to a large extent into the handicraft of all the native peoples of Alaska, such materials begin to occupy a larger place, at this point on the map, than they do to the south and east, and baskets, to a quite appreciable extent, give way to bags of skin. Therefore fewer baskets are made, and they are rarely seen away from their native locality. Nevertheless any representative collection of Alaska work should contain some of them.

It is at about this point, also, that the coiled method begins to appear in Alaska basketry. And I have observed that in the last twelve years, this method has gained great popularity in the Kuskokwim region. It is easier and more rapid, and gives greater durability

than the woven method; and the material is suitable to it. So that of late, hundreds of these coiled baskets, of all sizes, are brought out each season by the cannery tenders, and may be found even in the department stores. They are usually bowl shaped, or globe shaped, and are scantily decorated with bits of old cloth, yarn, skin, fur, etc. Some of them are very attractive; but the buyer should acquire them with his eyes open, exactly as he would buy a Tlingit basket with realistic animal figures upon it.

5. *Eskimo.* The Eskimo of the coast from Norton Sound north, and east along the Arctic, have no timber at their disposal—only the coarse grass of the tundra. They are poor basketmakers, what work they do being a rather crude coiled product. Their real art is in the handling of skins, and in the carving of ivory (walrus and fossil) and bone. In their basketry they use a bundle of grass stems for the coil foundation, and the grass blade for the stitching element. The work is done in an interlocking stitch. In primitive times, a bird bone, sharpened on a stone, served as a needle, but at present of course darning needles are easily available. Ornamentation is effected by the use of strips of light-weight hide, sometimes with the fur on it, or skin from the feet of birds, or any similar material that appears decorative to the Eskimo. This strip is laid upon the foundation coil, and made fast by being included under the stitching for a space. It is then laid back out of the way, while the stitching continues. Again it is laid flat on the coil and worked in out of sight for whatever space suits the weaver's design. Once more it is turned aside while the coiling continues without it, and again it is coiled under.

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Thus, when the work is done, the strip alternately appears and disappears, like ribbon run through beading. As beading this method of ornamentation is designated by Dr. Mason, and it is so known to students of basketry. It is widely distributed among basket-making peoples.

Mention has been made of the fact that the growth of a market sometimes tends to improve the quality of basketry to a certain extent. Here is a case in point. Of late years,—since the discovery of beach gold and the founding of Nome and the other far northern camps,—the Eskimo has come into constant association with the white people, and have thus seen that baskets have a commercial value. Accordingly, they are making more; and with practice, because they were poor weavers in the first place, their work improves on its technical side. The great trouble is, that in such cases the weavers invariably introduce other "improvements" along with that in execution, and that the baskets in a few years cease to express any phase of native life whatever, (unless it be the quite natural and universal one of a desire to make money,) and so have no ethnological value.

6. *Upper Yukon.* The Tanana River, and the Yukon above it, drain a country of spruce and tamarack timber, with, of course, plenty of birch and willow. Therefore it follows that the Tinne or Athapascan peoples who lived there used these materials for their baskets. Except in the case of the birch bark, which was folded into the required shape, the work was coiled. Even the birch baskets show some coiled work, in the method of stitching a willow shoot around the top for greater strength and finish. The coiled baskets were rigid and water-tight, practically unornamented, so far as I can

learn; although a few Hudson's Bay beads were sometimes caught on the stitching of those not expected to stand heat. The materials included spruce root, tamarack root, willow root, willow twigs and birch bark, but these people were never basket-makers to the extent that the Tlingit were. They used skins, or dishes of wood or bark, much more than baskets, and good specimens of their work are hard to find. Their netting in raw caribou hide was, and still is, very clever, and took the place of baskets for some uses. I have heard, too, of a certain deposit of clay that would burn into pottery, and was so used; but have never had the opportunity to verify or disprove the report. It is the only mention of pottery that I have heard in all Alaska.

7. *Lower Yukon.* Along the Lower Yukon, three types of basket were made. In addition to the coiled grass basket of the coast, there could be found the coiled root or willow basket like those of the interior. And, too, the people made, and still make, a woven basket exactly similar in form, material and weave to the ordinary Tlingit berry basket. The colored grass decoration is applied in precisely the same way, and the only difference discernible is in the design. I have never investigated the origin of this type, so that I do not know whether it was borrowed from the Tlingit, or whether the Tlingit method is a growth from it. This is a question of interest for future research.

Good baskets were exchanged commercially throughout all of Alaska, even before the advent of the white man and his money, and the fact that a basket was found at any given place, is not proof that it was made there. Frequently its origin must be known by its characteristics, and its presence accounted for.

A few general remarks on Alaska basketry can take no account of the many other forms of native handiwork; —the strange Chilkat blankets of wild goat hair and cedar bark, woven in weird totemic designs, and important in ceremonial; the wonderfully made, almost indestructible robes of eagle down; the sinew-sewed robes of fox paws, of various furs and combinations of fur, of woven goat hair, embroidered with deer toes or ptarmigan feet; the carvings in wood, horn, bone, ivory, stone and sometimes metal; the ancient and quite effective weapons; the primitive tools and utensils of everyday life, some of them better suited to the environment than anything the white man has been able to substitute for them; the tribal trays and ceremonial dishes; the burial boxes; the paintings, grotesque and totemic, like the blankets; the wrought copper vessels, formed from the great nuggets of native copper that used to be found sometimes in the Copper River country; the strange combinations of skins, and of skins and weaving, that took the place of baskets to a large extent in the Arctic regions; or of that most fascinating subject, the canoe, skin, bark or wood, according to use, tribe and locality.

Included, however, under the head of basketry, will be many developments in the form of mats, curtains, robes, cushions, sails, trays,—any needed articles, to which the woven or coiled fabric could be adapted.

When collected, and kept in the dry heat of our homes or museums, these baskets require some care. They should be disinfected, to begin with, and after that, the wood-fiber section should be oiled a little. The grass pieces are the better for exposure to dampness, if that does not involve too much handling. Dust is of course

undesirable, but less so that perpetual dusting! The best course is to protect them from dust, and then let them alone to a reasonable extent. Above all, do not let over-enthusiastic friends, with no real knowledge of, or love for them, paw them over—I think that just about expresses the proceeding—by way of showing their interest in them and their owner. The way in which well-meaning people will sometimes handle rare and delicate baskets, is strikingly like the manner in which the baby expresses its love for the kitten.

F. H. Cavanna

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